

**THY NEIGHBOR'S WIFE**, by *Gay Talese*. Doubleday, 568 pp., \$14.95.

## Voyeurism as science

THOMAS SZASZ

**T**HIS IS AN AMUSING book. Perhaps it could have been more than that, but it isn't. The basic trouble with it is that although Talese knows all there is to know about sex, he just doesn't understand what it's all about. He says that he wrote *Thy Neighbor's Wife* because he wanted to produce a "work that would reflect the social and sexual trends of the entire nation. . . ." and he characterizes the "tone" of his report as "non-judgmental." His tone is, of course, anything but nonjudgmental: He likes those who advocate the free expression of sexual images and impulses and dislikes those who advocate sexual censorship and restraint.

Human sexual behavior, like all human behavior, has a biological base, but, unlike animal sexual behavior, human sexual behavior is inexorably a cultural product. The "naturalizers" of human sexuality—à la Hugh Hefner and William Masters—tell us that because sex is a "natural function" it is good, and a good society ought to allow the greatest possible scope for its expression. Talese, who has been completely taken in by the notion that contemporary Americans are the beneficiaries of a vastly successful sexual revolution, believes this attractive, but absurd, proposition.

The situation, I am afraid, is a bit more complicated. Actually, what Talese's own "research" has revealed is that never before have so many Americans masturbated and copulated so much and enjoyed it so little. Why else would they need books instructing them about the joys of sex? Even the Victor-

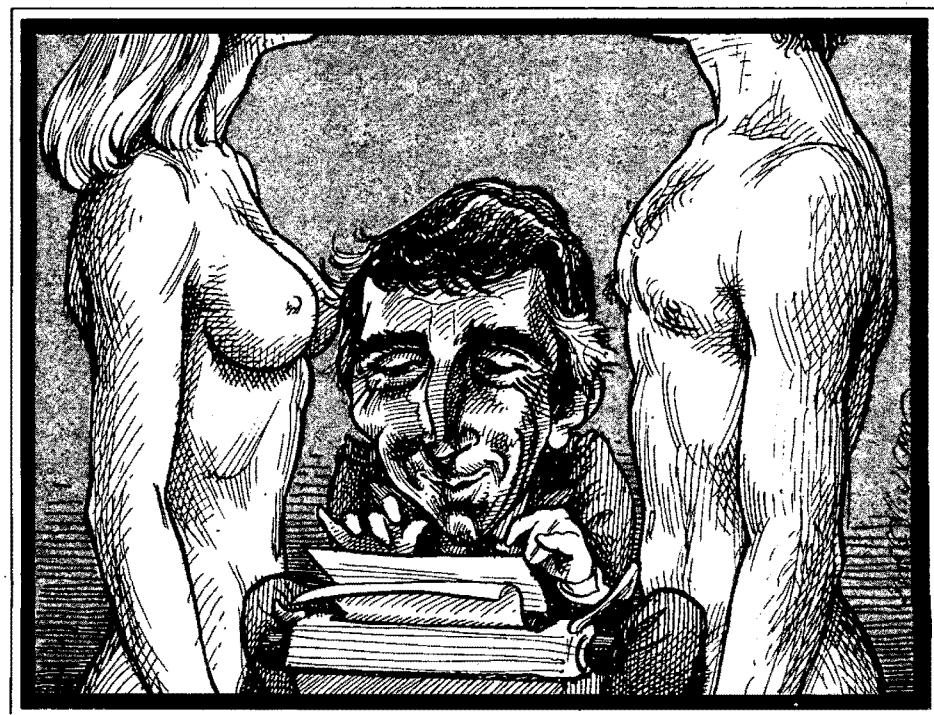
ians—not to mention our more remote ancestors—took it for granted that sex was pleasurable.

Anyone who writes about the sex lives of certain persons—especially if they are real, identified individuals—runs the risk of offending good taste, and Talese is no exception. I am (I believe) no prude, but I found this book to be morally distasteful. When the author includes, as Talese does, revelations about his own sexual experiences, one wonders what he hopes to achieve by means of that extra flourish of exhibitionism. In an odd last chapter, in which Talese refers to himself in third person, he offers us some clues about what went wrong with this book.

For five hundred pages Talese tells us sexual stories—mainly about men masturbating themselves to the visual paraphernalia supplied by the modern sex merchants and about men being masturbated by women in massage parlors (establishments that seem to hold a spe-

cial fascination for Talese). Finally—calling himself "Talese," as if, like Hugh Hefner and Alex Comfort, he were one of the characters of his own book, which indeed he is—on page 522 Talese notes plaintively that although his sexual fieldwork seemed to entail much erotic activity, "his allegedly ideal assignment was frequently less pleasurable than other people believed." I believe him. Then comes what might be his quintessential self-revelation. "And what bothered him [Talese] even more," he writes, "was that after three years of research and many months of pondering behind his typewriter, he had been unable to write a single word. He did not even know how to begin the book. Nor how to organize the material. Nor what he hoped to say about sex that had not already been said in dozens of other recently published works written by marriage therapists, social historians, and talk-show celebrities."

**A**FTER SIX MORE YEARS OF "research" and pondering, Talese still had nothing to say about sex—but produced a book on the subject nevertheless. And that is what's wrong with *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. Discounting that defect, it's not a bad book. Certainly, it's not as dull as are the typical



BRUCE MCGILLIVRAY

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productions of modern sex therapists. And it is, in a way, informative. Not about sex, but about people—especially their weaknesses. Consider some of the revelations:

- One of John Kennedy's campaign workers who in 1960 "thought that she had gained a White House job because of her intelligence and idealism, was disappointed to discover that what Kennedy and a few of his men found most desirable about her was her body."
- During a weekend when President Kennedy and his staff were in Palm Beach, the President's mother attended a party with an escort that *Time* magazine's Washington correspondent Hugh Sidey had overheard being referred to as her "gigolo." A confidential memo from Sidey to the staff of *Time* magazine found its way to the desk of Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who bullied Sidey with threats of suing for slander.
- At Esalen, famed for its encounter group therapy, massage was being "administered in the nude by attractive sun-tanned masseuses and masseurs to oil-slick patrons of the California spa. . . ."
- In a New York massage parlor ". . . there were Orthodox rabbis who covered their penises with condoms or plastic sandwich baggies so that they could be masturbated *without* fleshly contact."
- In California, at one of the country's most pretentious sex centers, Dr. Alex Comfort, biologist and best-selling author, "was unabashedly drawn to the sight of sexually engaged couples. . . . [W]ith the least amount of encouragement—after he had deposited his cigar in a safe place—he would join a friendly clutch of bodies and contribute to the merriment."

According to the dust jacket, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* "is about the men and women who shaped our sexual revolution." However, Talese's book certainly does not support the idea that there has been a sexual revolution in America. It supports only the impression that a few men (and women and their pathetic followers), who were sex-starved as adolescents and young adults, embraced uninhibited sexual behavior as "the answer" to what human life is—and should be—all about. As previously people worshipped gods, power, fame, or celibacy, so these Timothy Learys of sex worshipped masturbation and copulation engaged in as often as possible and with as many partners (perhaps of both sexes) as possible. Which, of course, is just plain silly. The least amount of careful reflection could warn anyone about

the promises of the pansexual utopians: Why should a lot of "good" sex be any more important for a good life—and that, after all, remains even the sexualists' goal—than, say, a lot of "good" food, drink, or drugs?

The naiveté that informs much of Talese's commentary is surprising. For example, Talese refers to ours as "this Freudian age" in which "Americans were opening up, acknowledging their

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## **Talese's book doesn't support his assumption that there has been a sexual revolution in America.**

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needs . . ." as if these observations were self-evidently true. I am not sure that we have good reasons for believing that Americans, en masse, are really engaging in much more sex now than they did, say, in the antebellum South. But never mind the weakness of that generalization. Consider rather the shallowness—indeed, the absurdity—of characterizing a therapeutic ideology of sexual salvation through masturbation (and unrestricted copulation for sensual pleasure) as "Freudian." To his dying day (in 1939), Freud maintained that masturbation was a dangerous and damaging practice—a view that even contemporary psychoanalysts more often support than oppose. In fact, Freud called masturbation "the one major habit, the 'primal addiction'" for which other addictions, such as to alcohol or morphine, are mere "substitutes." Furthermore, in his definitive *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud defined the psychoanalytic criterion for a "perversion" as "the abandonment of the reproductive function. . . . We actually describe a sexual activity as perverse if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it." Believing that Freud and psychoanalysis favor sexual freedom and pleasure is like believing that Lenin and communism favor economic freedom and pleasure. That many people believe these things proves not that they are true beliefs—but only that those who hold them are true believers.

**T**AKEN AS A SERIOUS work on human sexuality, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* has other major shortcomings: It is mainly about male sexuality, which it treats in an unabashedly macho style; it says virtually nothing about homosexuality; and it falls flat-faced for the view that sex is a medical concern. After working as a nonsalaried manager at a New York massage parlor, Talese "began to see the masseuse as a kind of unlicensed therapist. Just as thousands of people each day paid psychiatrists money to be heard, so these massage men paid money to be touched." But his "research" has stupefied, not enlightened him.

For human beings, sex, like life itself, can be a source of great joy or a heavy burden or both. Which it is, and why and how it is one or another—these are matters of the utmost complexity and delicacy. To assume that the maximal expression of the human sexual impulse is a good thing, as Talese and his "sexual revolutionaries" assume—is not very different from assuming that its minimal expression is a good thing, as the Church Fathers and other puritans assumed. Such inversions of values are dramatic and may be the source of great riches and power—but they are not very instructive, intellectually or morally.

The sad but simple fact is that the satisfaction of the sexual appetite is likely to be in conflict with the satisfaction of other human desires—not merely because some bigots seek to deprive us of harmless pleasures, but because all of mankind's major pursuits compete, as it were, with each other for the limited amount of attention and time that people can devote to such things. For example, intense cultivation of religion interferes with scientific pursuits; intense cultivation of athletics, with intellectual pursuits; and intense cultivation of family life, with professional pursuits. *Mutatis mutandis*, intense cultivation of sexual experiences may be gained only at the expense of sacrificing some other sources of satisfaction—and intense attachments to family, work, religion, and so forth are very likely to interfere with sexual pursuits and pleasures.

In what ways different people—men and women, young and old, of one religion or another or of none—ought to satisfy or curb their sexual appetites remains much the same problem for mankind that it has always been. Like Masters and Johnson's sexual recipes, Talese's sexual reportage pretends to give us answers without even knowing what the questions are.

**IMAGINING AMERICA, by Peter Conrad. Oxford University Press, 336 pp., \$12.95.**

# Imagined, or imaginary?

DONALD DAVIE

A FEW WEEKS AGO I HAPPILY revisited my old haunts in California, staying two nights in the old wing of the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, refurbished but still solidly and delightfully old-fashioned; then driving south on Interstate 280, high above the bayshore cities and not far below the forested spine of the peninsula. We were headed for Palo Alto, named for the vast old redwood that confronted Gaspar de Portolá in the base camp that he established at San Francisquito Creek on November 6, 1769. Two days later on the Stanford campus we helped to celebrate publicly the eightieth birthday of Janet Lewis, poet, librettist, and author of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, *The Ghost of Monsieur Scaron*, and other neglected masterpieces.

Having so lately reexperienced this humane and various and decorous ambiance, so resonant with pieties, with achievements of austere resolution, with long and settled affections and loyalties, what am I to make of a book that tells me, "California is a paradise because it grants human beings the freedom to be inhuman, either as psychedelically enlightened angels or as carnal animals"? Or what can I be but bewildered when I read that "California, cosmetically pampering and chemically immortalizing the body, has frustrated evolutionary progress, and even made death into hedonistic self-indulgence"? Again:

Art dies in Europe, and is born again in California. Forest Lawn at Glendale is Italy reproduced and therefore resurrected. It grants a stay of execution to works which time is steadily ruining, like Leonardo's 'Last Supper' (which it has transferred . . . to the indestructibility of stained glass) or Ghiberti's bronze Baptistry doors from Florence.

I am baffled by this, not only because I always thought glass was eminently de-

structible, but because as it happens I write within one mile of a replica of the Parthenon, and this stands not in Glendale, California, but in Nashville, Tennessee. For this author, then, are "California" and "America" interchangeable terms? Sometimes they seem to be, as when he declares: "America makes the rejection of literature easier because it estranges the artist from the society he knows, and thus baffles his imagination." But at other times Aldous Huxley's and Christopher Isherwood's California seems to be distinguished sharply from other American places like W. H. Auden's New York; thus it is specifically California that "abets the mystic by confounding time, reshuffling history, giving the past a face lift."

It hardly matters, however; for the two judgments are equally insulting to Janet Lewis, historian and author of scrupulously well-researched historical novels, as well as insulting to the native and adopted Californians, writers and musicians, who gathered to honor her. What we were applauding in her was an exceptional and beautiful alertness, sustained with serene self-discipline through a lifetime—and this in a milieu where, so Peter Conrad the Oxford don assures us, "The blithe seasonless weather, the hypnotism of piped music, the bland enticements of television, all are preparations for death. California lulls one gradually into insentience, so that when death comes it is hardly noticed."

Let no one say that the occasion I remember was an exception that proves the rule. I lived in northern California for ten years and found such fortifying experiences more common there than in other places I have dwelt in. And let me not hear that what Conrad is talking about is southern California, for I have lived in Los Angeles and have found the same civilities and the same vivacities there. So, trying to measure up Peter Conrad's confident formulations against one's own experience, what can one say? The obvious temptation is to say that what Conrad calls "California" exists nowhere but inside his head. But that won't do either, and for two reasons. In the first place we have been told of this mythical California before; it is not in Conrad's or anyone else's head, not really *conceived* at all, rather it is "in the air" wherever glib and journalistic people gather and are heard from. Across the English-speaking world (including other states of the Union), just such pronouncements, delivered with just such aplomb and meretricious sparkle, are

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